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Marina Tsvetaeva as Literary Critic and Critic of Literary Critics

Sibelan Forrester

Marina Tsvetaeva's literary criticism has long been overshadowed by her poetry and, more recently, her autobiographical prose.¹ Like most of her readers, I know her best as a poet, and this identity both authorises and complicates her critical position and authorial voice. Her critical texts tend to be used to illumine her work in genres that reveal and create an individual speaking self, although they also call attention to the 'critical' content of her poetry. Tsvetaeva's criticism offers much more, however: while accepting most of the Russian poetic canon of her age, it conveys ambiguous messages both about the critic's authority and project and about her relationship to her predecessors. The critical articles merge in many ways with her other prose (memoirs, autobiography, and especially literary theory);² the difficulty of drawing genre boundaries in Tsvetaeva's prose reflects her intentional genre-mixing, as well as her challenge to the literary hierarchies that contribute to genre definitions. Her urge to claim authority, expressed through her use of accepted critical tone and terminology in parts of her texts, alternates with subversion of authority to provide a flexible critical position. The critic still holds a kind of status, but this status turns out to be due to the critic's primary identity as a poet. Tsvetaeva's critical prose reveals the interplay of gender, genre and authority and the tremendous political stakes in establish-

1. This situation may change now that several of Tsvetaeva's critical and theoretical articles are available in a very readable English translation, *Art in the Light of Conscience. Eight Essays on Poetry*, trans., introd. and notes by Angela Livingstone, Cambridge, Mass., 1992. This volume includes the essays 'Downpour of Light' and 'The Poet on the Critic'. I have not used Livingstone's translations in this article because her English versions do not always preserve the elements I examine.

2. Whether one calls it 'literary theory' or invents terms such as 'essays on poetry', articles such as 'Poets with History and Poets without History' and 'Art in the Light of Conscience', while containing many elements of literary criticism, are clearly also concerned with broader, theoretical issues of art.

ing the criteria by which literature must be judged, especially for someone as invested in her art as she is.

In this study I shall concentrate on three of Tsvetaeva's early critical articles, 'Downpour of Light' (1922), an idiosyncratic review of Boris Pasternak's book *My Sister Life*, 'Hero of Labour' (1925), a critical memoir of Valerii Briusov and his work and 'A Poet about Criticism/the Critic' (1926), an attack on *émigré* criticism and critics.³ These three pieces are used to structure references to a wider range of other works and to demonstrate the place of the physical body in her criticism, the nature and effects of the style of her criticism, her maintenance of ambiguity, and the implications of her criticism of critics.

Tsvetaeva writes criticism almost exclusively about her own specialty, poetry and poets.⁴ Her literary criticism offers interpretation of work, criticism proper (judgement of the work), her own readings and reactions to the work, and guidance to her reader on what to read and how to read it. She is only one of the many Russian poets who have written literary criticism; like Pushkin and his circle, or the Symbolists, she attempts to form a reading public capable of fully appreciating the writing she values, especially her own. It is already a cliché that Russian literature often sublimates political concerns because of the historical succession of oppressive climates which allowed no better forum for public discussion. Though Tsvetaeva and many others reject the mandatory connection of literature with politics, the pressure exerted by this tradition of political concern and content makes even that rejection a political position. Thus, it is no surprise that literary politics informs Tsvetaeva's criticism of critics.

On the whole, the values Tsvetaeva assigns to works and poets may seem far from controversial to today's reader. Even her vision of the poet and the poetic process is clearly derived from nineteenth-century poetics, and her own experience, located at the centre of her descriptions

3. 'Svetovoi liven' is Tsvetaeva's first published piece of literary criticism, and 'Geroi truda' is the first of her literary memoirs, while 'Poet o kritike' is her first substantial critical article and, according to Simon Karlinsky, her 'single most successful and valuable piece' of prose written in the 1920s (S. Karlinsky, *Marina Cvetaeva. Her Life and Art*, Berkeley, 1966, p. 274). My choice of two works of criticism proper and one work of metacriticism also duplicates the relationship of Tsvetaeva's criticism to the writing that it criticises.

All three pieces will be cited from the edition: M. Tsvetaeva, *Izbrannaiia proza v dvukh tomakh*, New York, 1979, vol. 1; all translations are my own.

4. It is interesting and indicative that Tsvetaeva's concentration on poetry (Russian as well as German and occasionally French) effectively prevents her from devoting critical attention to the prose works written by women (for example, Sigrid Undset, Selma Lagerlöf, Pearl Buck) which she was reading in the 1930s. Her comments on these works appear only in her letters to other women (Vera Muromtseva Bunina and especially Anna Tesková), perhaps reflecting Tsvetaeva's sense that her female correspondents would be more interested than the general reading public in 'women's writing'.

of poetry, is strongly mediated by the theories and practice of her many favourite nineteenth-century authors. Almost all the poets she recurrently mentions are now generally recognised as great (Goethe and other German Romantics, Pushkin, and among her contemporaries Blok, Rilke, Maiakovskii, Pasternak, Akhmatova, Mandel'shtam),⁵ or are considered secondary but still significant in the context of the Russian Silver Age (Briusov, Bal'mont, Voloshin, Esenin, etc.). The poets she cites whose status was or is not so high (Karolina Pavlova, T. Churilin, Adelaida Gertsyk) rarely appear in her criticism, and then are often associated with a higher-status poet (as Gertsyk and de Gabriack illumine Voloshin).⁶ Indeed, Tsvetaeva would seem interested only in writing about winners,⁷ and not at all attracted by the daily journalistic grind of book reviews.

Given that her assignment of poetic value can rarely be faulted, one might ask why Tsvetaeva's criticism has not been read and cited with the sort of reverence that is often paid to the criticism of such poet-critics as Gumilev or Mandel'shtam. One obvious possible reason is that Tsvetaeva was never part of a literary group, unlike her contemporaries Gumilev, Mandel'shtam, Maiakovskii, Briusov, Blok and others.⁸ Her criticism shuns even the political polarisation of Russian literature into Soviet and *émigré* camps. All the same, Khodasevich was not a member of any literary grouping but still wrote much-quoted criticism, and D. S. Mirsky remains a critical classic in spite of (or perhaps precisely because of) his refusal to limit his judgements of literature to one or another political system. A second obvious distinction is Tsvetaeva's gender; among women of her era who published literary criticism, many chose to sign their work with masculine pseudonyms (for example, Zinaida Hippus as 'Anton Krainii', Sof'ia Parnok as 'A. Polianin').⁹

5. It might be useful to recall that in *émigré* Paris in the 1920s Pasternak and Maiakovskii were hardly fixtures of any generally accepted literary canon.

6. See 'Zhivoe o zhivom,' in *Izbrannaia proza*, vol. 2, pp. 36–40; 45–6.

7. Even the biting depiction of the hopeless would-be poet Mariia Papper in 'Zhivoe o zhivom' (ibid., pp. 68–9) illustrates Voloshin and Khodasevich more than it describes Papper's own work from any angle.

8. This rejection of poetic groupings was the result of a principled position: 'Poeticheskie shkoly (znak veka!) – vul'garizatsiia poezii...' ('Poet o kritike', ibid., p. 239). Tsvetaeva's critical projects differ considerably from those of poet-critics who wish either to attack competing groups or to establish parameters for their own groups. As Barbara Heldt points out, women poets were much less likely than men to belong to the literary groupings of the Silver Age and early post-Revolutionary period (Barbara Heldt, *Terrible Perfection. Women in Russian Literature*, Bloomington, Indiana, 1987, p. 98).

9. Though it is probable that knowledgeable readers were well aware of the identities that these pseudonyms concealed, Tsvetaeva still emphasises the importance of the author's true name as a guarantee of quality: 'Firma, v dannom sluchae, imia avtora' ('Poet o kritike', *Izbrannaia proza*, vol. 1, p. 225), complaining that a critic who does not cite from a poet under review gives no guarantee of trustworthiness other than 'Imia v kontse stolbtsa' (ibid., p. 236).

Though Tsvetaeva signs her criticism with her own name and writes with explicitly female language (use of verb forms, etc.), at least one later article suggests that the signature was an issue for her as well.¹⁰

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Tsvetaeva's criticism struck many readers as idiosyncratic and even 'hysterical' in its style and reasoning. It was difficult to read according to the standards for criticism of her time, not fulfilling the critical ideal of 'a tone of detachment and objectivity'.¹¹ Her very idiosyncrasy and refusal to duplicate the canonical style of literary criticism makes every word detract from her critical authority; the impression of 'hysteria' produced by her writing on some readers ties her style back to her gender and to the presence of a female body (in this case a womb, Greek *hystera*) lurking behind a text written by a woman who uses woman's language. Her stylistic innovations might still have attracted approval and attention if they had served some overt critical purpose, like the Futurists' flashy and quotable rejections of the recognised canon;¹² unlike the Futurists, however, Tsvetaeva accepts the better part of the Russian poetic canon of her age in order to perform a radical re-reading of its texts and authorial personalities. This ambiguous relationship to the Russian poetic tradition makes the explicit content of her critical prose appear more conservative and less interesting than that of many other poet-critics. The relative lack of study of Tsvetaeva's critical works suggests that the full significance of these texts can only be found by examining them as works of literature, reading below their surfaces.

10. In 'Zhivoe o zhivom' Tsvetaeva recalls how she was tempted by Voloshin's suggestion that she begin writing poetry under a variety of pseudonyms. She refused, but, 'A khoroshii byl by Petukhov poet! A tekh poeticheskikh bliznetsov po sei den' oplakivaiu' (Tsvetaeva, *Izbrannaia proza*, vol. 2, p. 41).

11. René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism 1750–1950*, 8 vols, New Haven, 1955–93, Vol. 7, German, Russian, and Eastern European Criticism, 1900–1950, 1991, p. 280. Interestingly, this formulation occurs in a part of the text where Wellek is evaluating the criticism of Viacheslav Ivanov, a Symbolist poet whose writing and theories Tsvetaeva admired very much.

Mandel'shtam is generally taken seriously as a critic despite the syntactic and logical games he plays in some of his critical works. See, for example, Svetlana Boym's respectful use of evaluations of Tsvetaeva and Maiakovskii from his essay 'Literary Moscow,' in *Death in Quotation Marks*, Cambridge, Mass., 1991, pp. 192–6. Perhaps a certain stylistic freedom is acceptable as long as one is calling for 'manliness' in poetry, as Mandel'shtam does in this piece.

12. One obvious example here is the much-quoted injunction that the classics of Russian literature should be thrown from the steamship of modernity, and the entire 1910 manifesto 'Slap in the Face of Public Taste'.

Tsvetaeva's Critical Body

Tsvetaeva's criticism treats poetry as an organism, whether the unit under discussion is one poem, one cycle, one book, or one poet's opus. Her review of Pasternak's *My Sister Life* describes the book as if it were a tree, complete with chirping birds.¹³ By contrast, Briusov's poetry and career are a granite embankment or marble sculpture, monuments to labour rather than offspring of a poetic gift.¹⁴ Tsvetaeva's comprehension of poetry as a physical organism leads her to speak of poetry as a living, human body, as in this description of the relationship of form and content from 'A Poet about Criticism/the Critic':

It isn't a plaster cast! No I am seduced by the essence. afterwards I'll embody [it]. *That* is a poet. And I will embody [it] (here already the question of form) as essentially as possible. The essence is the form – a child cannot be born different from itself! Gradual revelation of features – that is the growth of a person and the growth of a work of art.¹⁵

Repetition of the verb 'voploshchu' ('embody'), formed from the root 'plot' ('flesh'), could make the poet analogous to God, the great incarnator; but the assertion that the child cannot be born differently equates the poet and poem more to parent and child. Tsvetaeva mentions the well-known comparison of poetic incubation to pregnancy and childbirth but considers it too obvious and widely-known an analogy to need either elaboration or justification: 'everybody knows about this – and it is universally known'.¹⁶ The 'femininity' of the poet's activity is also expressed by descriptions of the possibilities contained like babies within the poet: 'It's not Pasternak who is a newborn..., it's the world that is newborn in him.'¹⁷ Thus Tsvetaeva feminises the 'organic' metaphor of male Romantic poets, applying the analogy of pregnancy to Pasternak as well as to herself. Her concern for the presence of the body in the writer's voice is surely one factor underlining Hélène Cixous's analysis of Tsvetaeva's prose as *écriture féminine*.¹⁸

If the poet's writing is somehow identical to a human body, it is not surprising that Tsvetaeva interprets not only poetry but also parts of

13. Pasternak, *My Sister Life*, p. 136.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

15. Tsvetaeva, *Izbranniaia proza*, vol. 1, p. 240.

16. Tsvetaeva, 'Iskusstvo pri svete sovesti', *ibid.*, p. 381. This idea is also a significant element in Tsvetaeva's poetry; see for example 'Kazhdyi stikh – ditia liubvi' (1918), in *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy v piati tomakh*, New York, 1983, vol. 2, p. 14.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

18. See Hélène Cixous, 'Difficult Joys', in *The Body and the Text. Hélène Cixous, Reading and Teaching*, ed. Helen Wilcox et al., New York and London, 1990, pp. 16–17.

poets' biographies and even poets' bodies. One example is her description in 'Downpour of Light' of Pasternak's appearance as having something both of an Arab and of his horse, 'both of the Arab and his horse: wariness, listening closely, – and just about to ...'.¹⁹ This both reacts plausibly to Pasternak's face, which early photographs show as somewhat exotic for a Russian, and suggests a thoroughbred quality, a perfect unity between rider (intention?) and steed (execution?), even an archaic, less-civilised quality which would fit Tsvetaeva's other descriptions of Pasternak's verse as somehow closer to (non-Western) nature than to (Western) culture. Similar examples include Briusov's wolfish look and 'shod face' and Maiakovskii's gladiator features.²⁰ The changing nature of Tsvetaeva's own poetry evokes the ageing of her face,²¹ phrased in a manner that suggests an acceptance of women's objectification in art and social standards of beauty.²² Physical traits and biographical details, like elements of a poem, are interpreted as literary elements full of significance, and clues to the poet's work.²³

This attitude can also apply to the physical look of a book itself, as even that factor, something that influences the book's reader, is introduced into Tsvetaeva's criticism. The first two sentences of 'Downpour of Light' describe the gloomy appearance of the newly published Soviet edition of Pasternak's *My Sister Life*, which to her suggests death more than the life its title promises: 'In a khaki dust-cover, ... a bit crude, uncomfortable, all covered in some sort of funereal bruises, – not quite a catalogue of mortuary wares, not quite the last gamble on life of some expiring publisher.'²⁴ The 'funereal' bruises, 'mortuary' accessories and 'expiring' publisher emerge from the book's physical appearance and belie the life force that Tsvetaeva goes on to find on every page. Starting her reader off with these gloomy expectations allows her to surprise her reader with the book's actual liveliness, as if to claim that it will retrieve readers from death (or, perhaps, Russian literature from its bruising in the Revolution).

However, the book as a physical object is not important only for the way its cover can mislead; Tsvetaeva goes on to describe herself waking

19. Tsvetaeva, *Izbrannaia proza*, vol. 1, p. 136.

20. Ibid., p. 198, while the reference to Maiakovskii is in 'Epos i lirika sovremennoi Rossii', ibid., vol. 2, p. 21.

21. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 223.

22. In the 1916 poem 'Nastanet den' – pechal'nyi, govoriat!', the fourth poem of the cycle 'Stikhi o Moskve', Tsvetaeva explores the links between stillness, decorum, and death. The sixth line, 'Skvoz' legkoe litso prostupit lik', could also be applied to a reader's image of a poet's work once that poet has died and ceased to evolve (*Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, vol. 1, p. 216).

23. One may note a corresponding presence of poets' looks and bodies in Tsvetaeva's poems to other poets, Mandel'shtam, Blok and Akhmatova.

24. Tsvetaeva, *Izbrannaia proza*, vol. 1, p. 135.

in the morning with the book open on her breast.²⁵ Lower on the same page, she describes the book's content: '[Pasternak] intentionally let everyone say – everything, in order at the last second, with a perplexed gesture – [to pull] a notebook out of his breast pocket: "And I ...".' The book that now lies on her breast is transformed into the notebook that Pasternak pulls from his breast pocket, closest to the heart and its rhythmic beat, and this common touch of book to breast gives the poet and his reader heart-to-heart contact via the poems. What is more, the 'wide-opened' book on the critic's breast exactly parallels the later description of Pasternak's wide-openness: 'Pasternak – that is an utter wide-open[ness]: eyes, nostrils, ears, lips, arms.'²⁶ Through the openness shared by Pasternak's poetic image and the book as his incarnation, in effect, she wakes in the morning with the poet himself spread out on her breast. A secret erotic contact of poet and reader is encoded in Tsvetaeva's admiring review of Pasternak's poetry; this contact in turn underlines the inspiring weight of the book, which leads to the conception of this essay.

If we recall the original associations with death and gravestones, however, it is also somewhat threatening that the narrator awakes with this dual burden of death and life on her breast. As Tsvetaeva points out later in the piece, her pleasure in discovering Pasternak's poetry has been mediated by a threat to her ability to breathe properly and to her own poetic 'voice,' since Pasternak is the first contemporary 'for whom I don't have enough of a ribcage [grudnoi kletki]'.²⁷

The sense of not having enough ribcage or breath to encompass Pasternak's work is only one example of how Tsvetaeva's criticism traces the effect of poetry on the reader's body: her readings are often performed as a meeting of two bodies. Another wonderful example, also from 'Downpour of Light', stresses what the poetry in the book does to her body: 'My first action, having endured the whole of it: from the first blow to the last – arms wide: this way, so that all [my] joints cracked. I wound up under it, as if under a downpour.'²⁸ The gender of the speaker is clear in the feminine verb form *popala* ('wound up'), while the 'unfeminine' detail of cracking joints underlines the common human effort that reading this poetry demands. Once again, the body of our critic contacts the body of Pasternak himself, here in repetition of the word *nastezh* ('wide open'), used to describe the movement of her arms and the state of his entire body, as mentioned above. Pasternak's wide-open arms make her open her own arms wide, so that the two can now embrace.

25. Ibid., p. 135.

26. Ibid., p. 138.

27. Ibid., p. 147.

28. Ibid., p. 136.

Other examples of physical reactions convey the critic's impossible desire to rewrite the whole book with her own hands: 'my hands are burning to cite it here entirely', 'I gnaw my hands [in frustration]', 'my hands really will be gnawed to shreds', and a phrase which describes both the result of the critic's erotic contact with Pasternak's poetry and the threat of being possessed by his work and talent: 'let us make way for the one bursting out of me even more: P. himself'.²⁹ The process of reading has introduced the poet into the critic's body, and now he (as words, the body comprised by his poetry) rushes from her body in birth-like violence. Evidently the organic paradigm can fit the practice of critical citation as well as the poetic process. Tsvetaeva as critic must let Pasternak out in order to avoid being smothered or choked by his power, so that his rebirth in her review serves her as a kind of exorcism.

Although the distinctive role of the body in her criticism provides Tsvetaeva a way to convey her experience of inspiration as a reader and writer, it would be unfair to imply, as does René Wellek,³⁰ that inspiration was her central explanatory conceit. Her references to craft in the poetic process and rejection of the idea that a 'divine spark' in the poet's soul compensates for lack of talent and skill reflect a concern with conscious processes in literary production not unlike that of the Formalists, though use of the term 'craft' is more often associated with the Acmeists.³¹ In her theoretical articles Tsvetaeva rejects the idea that poets are elevated beings bringing moral lessons to the rest of the world, and she posits an 'in-between' world where art takes place that partakes of both the 'heaven' of inspiration and the 'earth' of poetic technique. Along with her attention to craft, Tsvetaeva's understanding of the poem as a body nonetheless leads her to reject Formalist emphasis on scholarly dissection of poetic processes; craft and inspiration can be invoked to correct one another, and Tsvetaeva allows neither to assume greater importance or stability than the other.³²

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 140, 144, 141.

30. Wellek, who devotes several pages to the criticism of Blok, Ivanov, and other Silver Age poets in the seventh volume of his monumental *History of Modern Criticism*, dismisses Tsvetaeva with one phrase: 'The Symbolists and Acmeists believed in inspiration (and so did, e.g., Marina Tsvetaeva)' (p. 251). I would suspect that this oversimplification is not unrelated to Tsvetaeva's equally summary description in 'Poet o kritike', ('"formal'nyi metod", to est' vidoizmenennaia bazarovshechina)' (*Izbrannaia proza*, vol. 1, p. 224). Even sixty-five years after its first publication, 'Poet o kritike' has the power to alienate and incense certain readers.

31. *Ibid.*, *Izbrannaia proza*, vol. 1, p. 224. Note that Tsvetaeva's use of the term *remeslo* ('craft'), as the title of one book of poetry and as a term in criticism comes not from the Acmeists and their 'Tsekh poetov' but rather from a poem by another outstanding poetic craftswoman, Karolina Pavlova's 'Ty, utselevshii v serdtse nishchem' (1854).

32. Indeed, Tsvetaeva's critical theories, like her poetic use of gender, reject dualism in favour of more flexible dichotomy, as described by Anya Kroth in 'Androgyny as an Exemplary Feature of Marina Tsvetaeva's Dichotomous Poetic Vision', *Slavic Review* vol. 38, 1979, pp. 563–82.

As the first-person feminine past-tense verb *popala* cited in the previous paragraph indicates, Tsvetaeva often emphasises her own gender and authorial voice in her critical prose. However, at times she moves away from concentration on the person and reactions of this self through two strategies common in more traditionally structured literary criticism: first, occasionally hiding her gender behind pseudonymous terms such as *pishushchii*, which allow the use of masculine word forms,³³ and second, drawing her readers into a sort of critical community through use of the first-person plural, *my*. This position is implied in a number of statements concerning the overall effects of poetry on reader's bodies: '...this is a book – for everyone. And it's necessary for everyone to know it. This book is for souls what Maiakovskii is for bodies: a discharge into action. Not only healing – like those sleepy herbs of his – [but] miracle-working.'³⁴ Readers, as common possessors of both souls and bodies, are invited to join the critic in healing both by reading Pasternak's poetry. At other times, readers are drawn into a critical 'we' that is less conventional, since it implies not a commonality of literary and cultural values so much as a joint process of critical activity: 'But enough choking. Let us try sanely and soberly.'³⁵ Here the first-person plural verb form, 'let us try' ('popytaemsia'), draws the reader into the critic's overwhelmed choking ('zakhlebyvaniia') in reaction to Pasternak's poetry, and so into the movement of the whole text.

The reader's involvement through various linguistic devices brings us to the larger question of Tsvetaeva's critical style, and indeed of the style of all her prose works. What readers such as Simon Karlinsky³⁶ and Barbara Heldt have noted in describing Tsvetaeva's prose in general is particularly true of her critical essays. Heldt writes:

By choosing a style of highly-mannered subjectivism when not talking ostensibly about herself, Tsvetaeva is declaring her freedom from conventions of objective narrative while still retaining the right to historicity ... and to critical judgment of her fellow poets. She establishes her own identity through her evaluations of other poets, as well as through her juxtaposition of self with family. She is alternatively [*sic*] epigrammatic – as in her judgment of two Symbolist poets: 'All that is not Bal'mont is Briusov, and all that is not Briusov is Bal'mont' – and digressive. Simulating anti-logic, she makes judgments whose logic then becomes inescapable.³⁷

33. In 'Epos i lirika sovremennoi Rossii', *Izbrannaia proza*, vol. 2, p. 9.

34. Tsvetaeva, *Izbrannaia proza*, vol. 1, p. 148.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

36. Karlinsky, *Marina Cvetaeva*, p. 272.

37. Heldt, *Terrible Perfection*, p. 98.

The Soviet critic Aleksei Pavlovskii makes the valuable point that Tsvetaeva's works are often constructed according to principles more common to music: 'Tsvetaeva frequently builds her works and conducts motifs not so much by logical paths as by musical ones.'³⁸ Tsvetaeva does not adopt an academic tone 'of detachment and objectivity', as Wellek would have it, but rather transforms the genre of criticism with ellipses, sound allusions and morphological associations like those found in her poetry. Towards the end of 'Downpour of Light', for example, the critic stresses the power of Pasternak's book by abdicating her own responsibility: 'I am stopping. In despair. I've said nothing. Nothing – about nothing – for it is Life before me, and I don't know any words of that kind' ('Konchaiu. V otchaianii. Nichego ne skazala. Nichego – ni o chem – ibo peredo mnoi Zhizn', i ia takikh slov ne znaiu').³⁹ The assonance of the elliptic 'Konchaiu. V otchaianii' links the necessity of ending her piece with ending's 'rhyme', despair, and this rhyme negatively expresses the critic's desire to continue writing until she has recopied all the poems in Pasternak's book, echoing her earlier positive statements of the same desire.⁴⁰ Like the rest of her prose, Tsvetaeva's critical articles call attention to and create meaning through their own aesthetic structures, and they are not only expressions of opinion and judgement, but also works of art.

Tsvetaeva began writing and publishing criticism as a mature and confident poet, sure that her status as an artist conveyed the right to make pronouncements on literature in general,⁴¹ and this may well have eased her refusal of the 'smooth' prose more usually found in works of criticism. Rather than hiding her voice and person behind a standardised tone of authority, Tsvetaeva writes in an individual and even an eccentric voice. She is aware of her departures from the critical tradition, as she adds at the end of 'Downpour of Light': 'One doesn't [literally, "they don't"] write this way about contemporaries. I repent.'⁴² Here the community of 'we' composed of writer and readers is opposed to and grammatically excluded from the alienating 'they' who do not write this way. The repentance the critic displays may be due to what Svetlana Boym calls the 'tastelessness' of this kind of text, its passionate self-exposure, which includes display of the writer's marked, feminine gender.⁴³

38. A. Pavlovskii, *Kust riabiny. O poezii Mariny Tsvetaevoi*, Leningrad, 1989, p. 259.

39. Tsvetaeva, *Izbrannaia proza*, vol. 1, p. 147.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

41. Since Tsvetaeva's critical authority depends on her primary stressed identity as a poet, any 'nodes' of uncertainty and anxiety in her self-confidence as an artist have more to do with being a poet than with being a critic *per se*.

42. Tsvetaeva, *Izbrannaia proza*, p. 147.

43. See Boym's *Death in Quotation Marks*, pp. 194–9, for a discussion of 'obscurity' and lack of taste in women's writing.

Nonetheless, the eccentric and self-revelatory function of the prose can be balanced by the more 'classical'⁴⁴ objections attributed to her readers. At times her readers' comments are set apart by the quotation marks she otherwise uses for titles of poems: "A set of words, all for the sake of the repeating 'ch'".⁴⁵ To these imagined objections she responds: 'Yes, gentlemen', 'But, gentlemen', 'Gentlemen, you now know' and, humorously, 'after all I'm not pulling [you] by the ears'.⁴⁶ Of course this device allows her the last word; but her need to draw her readers into her argument as interlocutors reflects the same ambiguity present in her attitude toward authority in general. It may be that Tsvetaeva the critic, as a woman, is forced by the language and traditions of Russian literature to formulate a 'voice' whose claim to authority must constantly be defended from the imagined or remembered voices that challenge it.

Tsvetaeva's critical texts may strike some readers as 'hysterical' because they frequently give the impression of improvisation (only the impression, since her critical prose, like her poetry, resulted from long and painstaking work over drafts); this element undercuts the whole notion of the critical text as a finished, perfected piece of judgement and of the critic as a monumental authority. She corrects statements made earlier, including examples of her own poetry, makes self-deprecatory comments about her own writing, and creates texts which, like her scrupulously finished but apparently spontaneous poetry, preserve traces of their own history of composition. Thus she adds a footnote to 'Downpour of Light'⁴⁷ which corrects her statement on the first page that *My Sister Life* is Pasternak's first book but also suggests that she intuitively used the expression *poverkh bar'erov* ('over the barriers') in her text before learning that this was in fact the title of another of his books. Her comments on specimens of her own writing include 'Not a brilliant line' and 'from my helpless splashes';⁴⁸ in a footnote to 'Hero of labour' she comments that *ne povtoriu* ('I won't repeat') would be a better line than *ne utaiu* ('I won't conceal') in her early poem 'Vospominanie slishkom davit plechi'.⁴⁹ After 'rationally' picking apart Georgii Adamovich's criticism of her poetic voice as 'impertinently-breaking' ('derzko-sryvaiushchimsia'),⁵⁰ she offers a Cyrano-like list of

44. I say 'classical' here because of this technique's echo of Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*, with his obsession for anticipating and responding to his opponents' objections. Compare Livingstone, in her introduction to *Art in the Light of Conscience*, p. 10.

45. Tsvetaeva, *Izbrannaiia proza*, vol. 1, p. 139.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 135, 140, 146, 141.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

adverbs which she considers more suitable for use in this case, outdoing Adamovich's criticism with apparent criticism of herself: 'Wrathfully-breaking, yes. Manifestly-breaking, yes. Wrathfully, manifestly, languidly, noticeably, maliciously, nervously, pathetically, amusingly ...'. After the first few words, however, the repetitive rhythm and lack of grammatical anchor make the words seem to apply to the entirety of Adamovich's critical practice, especially since the words she suggests grow increasingly pejorative. After stating that Briusov went against the current of his own ungiftedness, she redefines the latter as something that cannot have a current, since it does not flow: 'I leave the mistake, as a useful one for those who read and those who write.'⁵¹ Leaving her own 'mistake' in the text as useful to readers and writers sets up a kind of textual instability, where the author comments on her own writing and her own place in the process of criticism and literature, lowering her own position to that of a fallible authority. This also gives her room to deviate and assert her own claim to authority through the 'mistake'. All these digressions from standard critical posture underline Tsvetaeva's own claim that she is a poet, not a 'specialist' in poetry: 'That's the business of specialists in poetry. My specialty is – Life.'⁵² Her critical article is constructed not as a monument to the critic's taste, but rather as part of a mutual activity of reading and writing.

Finally, Tsvetaeva's demanding prose style, commentary on writing, and sense that the reader participates in the process of writing, interpreting and making meaning, underlie her explicit insistence on reading as co-creation: as she says in 'A Poet about Criticism/the Critic', 'Tired of [reading] my piece – that means you read well and – you read something good. The reader's weariness is not a devastating weariness, but a creative one. Co-creative. It does honour both to the reader and to me.'⁵³ In writing criticism she aims to stretch and even to strain her reader. The greatest effect of the author's primary and even stressed identity as a poet is apparent in the making of her prose itself: the reader is educated and transformed not through lecture, but rather as an active participant in the demanding co-creation of a text. Like her inclusion of physical reactions to a poem, this increases the reader's involvement in the text and that text's conclusions, emphasising the process of reading through a text rather than presenting a fixed and final set of judgements.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

Tsvetaeva the Meta-Critic or Poet on Top

The title of 'A Poet about Criticism/the Critic' allows its author the satisfaction of making the poet the grammatical subject of her verbless phrase, while the critic (and/or criticism) is distanced from reader and writer by its oblique case. Tsvetaeva both emphasises that she is a poet who will write as such and immediately upsets the traditional hierarchy in which the critic creates a higher work of art by writing about the poet and poetry – a hierarchy which she herself goes on to invoke, as we shall see below. The title, as mentioned earlier, can also be translated ambiguously, as either 'A Poet about the Critic' or 'A Poet about Criticism'. Russian grammar makes this possible by requiring the same ending in the prepositional case for both masculine *kritik* and feminine *kritika*, as if to unite the two platonically in their identical form. This has the effect of making the critic potentially identical to the critic's writing, implying that the criticism is the critic's body, just as poetry forms the poet's body. The writer and the writing are essentially identical, they can be spoken of at the same time with the same language. The question remains, however: if Tsvetaeva is a poet, as she keeps insisting, then is her article criticism, poetry, or something else?

The inversion of the hierarchy of critic and poet implicitly stresses the issue of power in literary relations. In Tsvetaeva's reading, poets want power more than anything else.⁵⁴ Her juxtapositions of critic and poet point out the inherent power of the critic's position and so the importance of protecting the poet from irresponsible criticism. The fact that this poet writes criticism suggests that she herself must assume the position of critic if she wishes to have the right of reply when faced with bad criticism of her own work. It is no surprise that she sets out to correct her critics, since poets complain about critical reviews of their work all the time, and Tsvetaeva, like many women writers, had more than adequate grounds for feeling that she had been misunderstood.⁵⁵ Her criticism of critics is no more virulent than that of many other poets, but it is less usual for a poet to undertake such detailed and substantial instruction in how to avoid critical errors.

At its appearance, 'A Poet about Criticism/the Critic' caused a scandal and alienated a good part of the *émigré* literary community from

54. *Ibid.*, pp. 183, 232.

55. Compare Dale Spender, *The Writing or the Sex? Or why you don't have to read women's writing to know it's no good*, New York, 1989, esp. p. 63: 'What can be stated at the outset is that reviews have always been taken seriously by writing women. The literary history of women is so replete with protests about unjust reviews that the topic stands at the centre of women's literary traditions and suggests how different literary history and literary criticism could be if women's version of experience had been equally represented.'

Tsvetaeva.⁵⁶ Though she may have been naïve in assuming that an attack phrased in such personal terms would not be taken personally, the epigraph from Montaigne,⁵⁷ insisting that one can work for a very small audience or for none at all, suggests that she was quite conscious of the possible results of what she did. Her article sets out to defend both poet and reader⁵⁸ from the flawed criticism of bad critics. She supports her attack with numerous examples of inconsistent criticism in the appended 'Flower-bed', a series of quotations from articles by Georgii Adamovich interspersed with Tsvetaeva's own humorous and devastating comments. Although there are examples of Adamovich's comments about her own work, she includes many more statements about other poets, living and dead, which she considers just as bad. The element of self-defence expands to include the entire class of poets (so long as they are not playing critic). Despite the biting humour throughout the article, Tsvetaeva is deadly earnest in her typical defence of the underdog, in this case, of the poet. Her defence is to place herself above the critic, turning that customary hierarchy on its head. One might argue, after all, that a hierarchy of commentary and judgement that is continually reversed eventually assumes the form of a dialogue.

Tsvetaeva's demands on the critic reflect the dual nature of the critic's activity as both reader and writer, or as she puts it, 'an absolute reader who has taken up the pen'.⁵⁹ As an absolute reader, the critic must know the poet's entire opus in order to judge it competently and chronologically, must not expect to be amused and entertained by a difficult work, and preferably should have the vision to sense immediately what other readers will grasp only after ten or a hundred years. Bad readers, who either read with ill will or do not actually read at all, are damned.⁶⁰ Tsvetaeva compares the critic's judgement to a cobbler's ability to evaluate the soundness of a pair of boots,⁶¹ which both humorously refers to the utilitarian critics of the 1860s and challenges the idea

56. Karlinsky, *Marina Cvetaeva*, pp. 70–1.

57. "Souviens-toi de celui à qui comme on demandait à quoi faire il se peignait si fort en un art qui ne pouvoit venir à la connoissance de guère des gens, –

"J'en ay assez de peu", répondit-il. "J'en ay assez d'un. J'en ay assez de pas un" ('Poet o kritike', *Izbrannaiia proza*, vol. 1, p. 221).

The same quotation is used as the epigraph to the second notebook of Tsvetaeva's last published collection of poetry, *Posle Rossii*, in 1928 (*Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, vol. 3, p. 77). This repeated use as an epigraph to works of differing genre links Tsvetaeva's critical agenda once again with her poetic experience and production.

58. Karlinsky points out that in 'Poet o kritike', 'Tsvetaeva uses a multiple vantage point, in this case that of an innovating creative artist and that of an intelligent and inquisitive reader' (*Marina Cvetaeva*, p. 274).

59. Tsvetaeva, *Izbrannaiia proza*, vol. 1, p. 227.

60. *Ibid.*, pp. 234–5.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 225.

that there is a hierarchy of values among different arts and even crafts. Her insistence on the poet's need for money also deflates the generally lofty position of the poet in Russian society.⁶² In another section of the article a certain hierarchical positioning remains, as the critic observes the poet's work from a higher (if not a superior) level and creates in criticism a new work of art based on creative and co-creative reading: 'The folk, in a fairy tale, interpreted the dream of the elements, the poet, in a poem, interpreted the dream of the folk, the critic (*in a new poem!*) interpreted the dream of the poet.'⁶³ Hierarchy and non-hierarchy interplay as the poet requires the critic to be more like the poet and yet capable of seeing farther and more clearly.

Tsvetaeva demands that the critic as a writer provide copious citation in reviews⁶⁴ and have the taste to refrain from printing her or his own bad poetry. She advances the idea that a good critic must not only love poetry, but 'live in it' and know it well, somewhat self-servingly recalling her own critical qualifications as a poet. She damns the activity of critical dilettantes but also questions the value of the new Soviet Formalists, who merely dissect the living text, thereby killing it: 'A dissection, but a dissection not of a corpse, rather of a living [being]. Murder.'⁶⁵ The poem, again, is a living body whose integrity must be respected.

In addition, the article 'A Poet about Criticism/the Critic' unifies the two terms of its title by discussing the criticism of poets. Here, of course, what is at stake is the author's own position and her right to appropriate cultural standards (such as the image and work of Pushkin) in support of her own agenda. Given a poet's obvious natural qualifications as a critic (living in and knowing poetry, presumably loving it, and reading a great deal), at best the criticism of a poet illuminates two bodies of work, the poet's and the poet-critic's. At worst, only the poet-critic is revealed, though if the poet is of sufficient stature the criticism

62. Ibid., p. 232.

63. Ibid., p. 240. Emphasis Tsvetaeva's.

64. Tsvetaeva consistently cites at some length in her own reviews. At times, as in 'Svetovoi liven', she makes her reader's head spin with a succession of brief, unconnected fragments.

65. Ibid., p. 238. If the poet is a being who incarnates, as described above, then the Formalist project appears as a desire to dis-incarnate. Tsvetaeva finally labels the Formalists scholars rather than critics ('Poet o kritike', *Izbrannaia proza*, vol. 1, p. 239); the metaphor of biological dissection, perhaps meant to recall Bazarov with his frogs, makes a humorous contrast to her later comparison of formalist criticism to cookbooks. Here the fact that some would-be poets lack the wherewithal to produce real poetry reminds her of the economic 'zhestokii zakon neravenstva' which deprives the poor of luxurious ingredients in their cooking (ibid., p. 239).

may still be worth reading.⁶⁶ A poet's criticism is not dispassionate but rather expresses the passionate relation of two writers, their relatedness and unrelatedness. When this passion predominates, the result is opinion rather than judgement, or what Tsvetaeva calls 'otnoshenie'. It is in essence an entry into dialogue with the other poet rather than a final, monumental judgement.

Tsvetaeva adds that anyone, poet or bootmaker, is entitled to a personal opinion, as long as the words 'I' and 'me' are included. 'I' and 'me' do not bear the responsibility of a statement made without these qualifiers, and she claims that most lyric poets choose to be partisan and thus to abdicate critical objectivity. The lyric genre's traditional association with strong emotion (especially love) and poetic personality implies that a lyric poet's passionate temperament would lead to a 'passionate' tone and style in criticism rather than to 'dispassionate' style or objectivity in judgement. At the same time, the inclusion of 'I' and 'me' mark the author as a historical individual and make that individual more present in the text, especially since in Russian the first person singular is one important site of gender-marking. The demand for personal accountability, a personal voice, and the possibility that a different kind of criticism should be practised are undercut by the later suggestion that an epic poet, unlike the lyric, has not only a more 'objective, detached tone' but also a creative vantage point that can duplicate the position of society at large. 'Society at large', of course, speaks in the voice of the part of society that controls discourse and the formation of literary tradition – perhaps the very 'gospoda' ('gentlemen') whom Tsvetaeva addresses from time to time in her early criticism. In 'A Poet about Criticism/the Critic' her style ranges from the Dostoevskian 'Gentlemen, some fairness, and if not – even some common sense!' to emphasis on her own self and experience, 'To whom I listen' and 'For whom I write', an interplay of styles that positions the speaker variously.⁶⁷

Once more, Tsvetaeva creates a position for herself as critic that intertwines an idiosyncratic, individual voice with existing notions of the poet as a conduit for general poetic truth, the latter being much closer to cultural ideals of the critic as discerner and disseminator of 'truth' in judgements of literary value, the myth of critical objectivity. If we

66. As Tsvetaeva puts it, 'A na Bal'monta gliadet' i Bal'monta videt' – stoit' (ibid., p. 227). She distinguishes between poetic and academic criticism, mentioning Khodasevich as an example of a lyric poet who can produce good academic criticism when he wants to but implying that most poets do not want to (ibid., p. 228). The question of where she falls in this split is not addressed; for the purposes of this article she clearly sides with the poetic critic, but her later articles 'Pushkin i Pugachev' and 'Dva lesnykh tsaria' certainly pretend to (and, many would argue, achieve) the status of academic criticism.

67. Tsvetaeva, *Izbrannaiia proza*, vol. 1, pp. 225, 227, 231.

recall images of the poet in her poetry, such as a voice crying in the wilderness or an oracular voice of the gods, it appears that here too Tsvetaeva relies on a mystical subtext of the poet's value and vocation. It is no accident that the epigraph to the subsection of the article entitled 'To whom I listen' is taken from the story of Joan of Arc.⁶⁸ Tsvetaeva herself invokes the critic's interpretative function, as if to pay lip-service to critical authority, in the statement we have already seen: 'The folk, in a fairy tale, interpreted the dream of the elements, the poet, in a poem, interpreted the dream of the folk, the critic (*in a new poem!*) interpreted the dream of the poet.'⁶⁹ The critic, a higher instance of the poet, makes meaning of material which, like a dream, is raw and unprocessed. This time, however, I would like to point out that if the critic's work is indeed a 'new poem', then the critic has been transmogrified, with truly Tsvetaevan solipsism, into the poet, recalling Joseph Brodsky's point that her prose is just a continuation of her poetry 'by different means'.⁷⁰

The ending of 'A Poet about Criticism/the Critic' goes even further in describing the critic's powers of interpretation, as the ideal critic becomes 'The Sibyl above the cradle'.⁷¹ As a Sibyl leaning over a cradle, the critic is no longer a rational, masculine interpreter, but a prophet who is female, inspired by the god of poetry, Apollo, and (perhaps most strikingly) known for speaking in riddles which must then be deciphered. Like her image of the Poet Himself, Tsvetaeva's more conventional theories reveal the power of tradition in genre and text but may be undercut by her practice in critical writing, even containing their own subversion, as in this case. One might argue that an attempt to destabilise a system is furthered by incorporating what one opposes into one's objections, as no statically extreme position can be defended: extreme positions evoke and provoke their own opposites, while ambiguity allows freedom of movement. Ambiguity, too, is surely part of the heritage of a woman who refuses to keep silent. Her 'hysteria' as a woman writer is both concealed and confirmed by the discovery of a Sibylline womb in her ideal critic.

Clearly, Tsvetaeva's literary criticism and critique of critics lead beyond the stylistic traits common to all her prose work, to issues of the writer's authority in any genre. While her critical prose conveys her passionate belief in the importance of writing and poetry and the special issues that concern all major poets, the very form of the writing seems to modify, if not to undercut, the kinds of authority invoked in her content. Her individual identity as a writer, anchored by the invariable signature,

68. Ibid., p. 230.

69. Ibid., p. 240.

70. Iosif Brodskii, 'Predislovie. Poet i proza', in *Izbrannaia proza*, vol. 1, p. 8.

71. Ibid., p. 241.

is performed with great mobility for the reader. Her critical agenda is defined by her own experience, experience that is in turn clearly mediated by tradition. The main critical project of educating her reader in her own manner of thinking through apparent contradictions draws the reader into a co-creation of the text that must finally have consequences for the reader's own self-creation. As the penultimate part of 'A Poet about Criticism/the Critic' states, the reader, not the critic, is the final instance of interpretation and judgement in literature for Tsvetaeva.⁷²

72. Ibid., p. 240.